

Thomas Merton—Ashes To Ashes My Dream

By DANIEL BERRIGAN, S.J.

I will make your tongue cling to your palate; you will be mute.

—Ezekiel

I named it The Year of Everything Awful.

On second thought, not entirely. 1968; up and down, to and fro the pendulum swung. I was as though bound to it. To Hanoi in January, to bring home three captive US pilots. With spring and summer, the murders of Dr. King and Robert Kennedy. In May a footnote of hope; to Catonsville and the fiery disposal of pollutive materials, the draft files. October, trial in Baltimore and a speedy thumbs-down by Dame Justice and a three year sentence. Release on appeal and return to Cornell, not a whit chastened.

Then December, the blank snows of the countryside signaling that an awful year at long last was giving up the ghost.

December 10. A late meeting on campus with leaders of the Students for a Democratic Society. Change underway. The students were not so subtly shedding a nonviolent ethos; throughout the evening a disturbing rumble was just barely audible, as though an underground quake was underway.

Cold, cold. That night seemed to me, trekking somberly home, to be (in more senses than one) the bitterest weather of the year. Arrived, I turned on the television, curious to learn the local temperature. A fragment of a newsband crossed the tube; "...famous Trappist monk, today in Bangkok." That was all.

Now what event was crowning the terrible year, yet another plait of thorns? I began calling TV stations. It was after midnight; the world had shut down. Finally a New York voice confirmed the worst; the operative word was "died."

Merton dead. No question of sleep; I trudged about all night in the snow. From that night, the quote from Ezekiel was verified again. For a decade I could not utter a

public word about my friend.

Even now, twenty-five years later, as I take up the splendid book of Jim Forest [*A Life Of Thomas Merton* (Orbis, 1991)] an old pang strikes. So much leaps from the pages, texts and photos. Friendship, indefinable, unmistakable, sharp and sweet and mournful. And beyond recovering.

But of course not altogether so. In gratitude is recovery.

Gratitude also for Jim, and a book that gives pain and pleasure at once. I had wished at one point, as the Mertonmania gathered force and PhD's proliferated, and the lode of that life was mined to exhaustion—wished that my poor friend might rest in peace at last. Ashes to ashes my dream, Tom Merton going with the current of some Kentucky river, a Ghandian dying fall.

Relief from all that. Jim's prose is sprightly, robust, numinous when occasion warrants. The text befits the monk, the writer, the intellectual gyrovague, the curious far-ranging penetrating mind that arrived among us, offered and received gifts, and departed. Quite an achievement on Jim Forest's part, to tell the story with no hint of burbling, and a large measure of admiration (as is befitting, since he too was a friend, and the subject so admirable).

Over the years I forgot much; and then, with the help of *Living With Wisdom*, I recall "... (Merton) moved to a one room apartment with a wrought iron balcony at 35 Perry Street in Greenwich Village." I pass the house each week, en route to an AIDS patient further along on the same street. The iron balcony is vanished. Memo; kiss a hand to number 35.

1940... "He took a job teaching English at St. Bonaventure's (University) in Olean, (NY)." Recall; several years ago, I'm invited to the same campus. Proudly they show me the Merton collection of letters and manuscripts.

Impressed no end, I am shortly to be depressed—no end. On this campus of the

Friars of St. Francis, past the library, past the relics, march the squads of ROTC. Do the Merton papers rustle in that wind of incoherence? Would they, if the will were the way, self-destruct?

He wrote at the time, which is to say, wartime; "The valley is full of oil storage tanks, and oil is for feeding bombers, and once they are fed they have to bomb something." O prophetic soul!

Merton enters the Trappists, takes vows, is ordained to the priesthood. Writes Jim Forest; "He was troubled by the toxic fertilizers being used on the fields, the noise of machinery, and the sense that the monastery was imitating corporate America. There were dead birds in the fields and sick monks in the infirmary with illnesses Merton didn't think had visited the monastery in the days before crop dusting."

Thomas Merton is long dead, the time is the late '80s. I visit another monastery of his order. A group has gathered for a day of prayer, preparing for civil disobedience. The courtesy of the community is evident. We are welcome to worship in the chapel on the grounds; later the abbot will join us for a picnic lunch.

But throughout the morning, our prayer is interrupted time and again as a small plane veers south to north overhead, back, forth. Toil and trouble! They are dusting the wheat fields with chemicals; the wheat is to be ground and baked into Monks' Bread, the

offered communion. With considerable chagrin Tom transmitted the order; friends of the quality of A.J. Muste and Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder were present—each beyond doubt for the first time at a monastery and Mass.

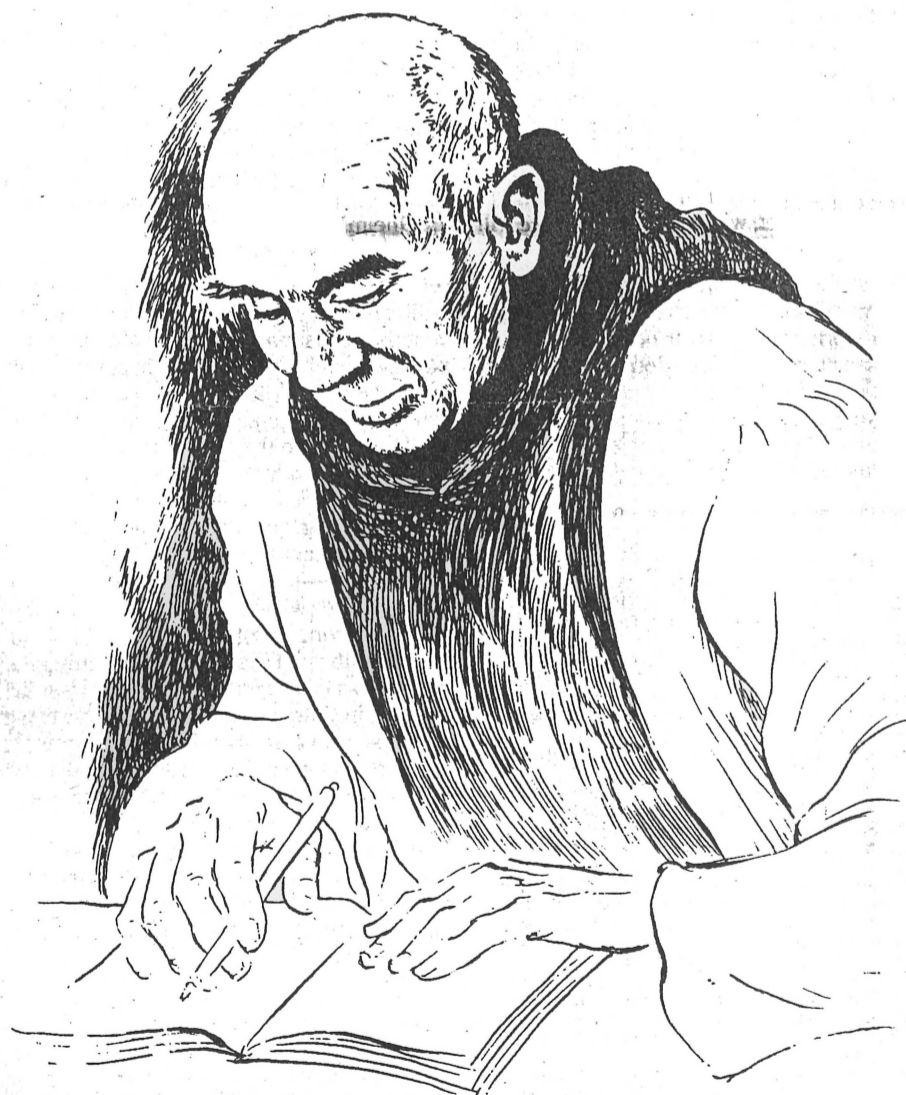
Still, such things tend to right themselves. My brother Philip and a friend careened in by auto, late. The Eucharist was well underway. Philip had, of course, heard nothing of the stern pronunciamento. So, when communion was passed, it went from his hand to everyone present. *Sic solvitur*, and then some.

Jim Forest again; "...Lorenzo Barbato, a Venetian architect...brought Thomas Merton a liturgical vestment, a stole which had been used by Pope John XXIII."

Sometime in the early '80s, friends gathered in Louisville for a two day conference on Thomas Merton. The Gethsemani community invited us to pass an afternoon at the monastery. There was to be, among other events of that day, a Mass in the novitiate chapel; I was invited to offer the homily.

Someone suggested that I don the above mentioned stole, which was extremely and splendidly baroque in character, enlaced with jewels and gold and whatnot. Placed weightily on my shoulders, the marvel offered quite a contrast with my attire, jeans and a denim shirt. I arose, disquisitioned with merciful brevity on the Gospel of the day, the Feast of St. Francis of Assisi. And all during the homily, I could hear behind me, where a clerical circle was assembled in the sanctuary, the drumming of a shoe on the stone floor, insistent and plainly audible to all.

I learned later that the foot in question had



Thomas Merton

Fritz Eichenberg

financial mainstay of the community.

When questions arise with the Father Abbot, it is explained that this is a safe and sound procedure. Period.

To revert. The year is 1965. Writes Jim Forest; "...Thomas Merton received a group of pacifists...for a retreat on 'the spiritual roots of protest.'" How could one know at the time? The retreat proved a watershed for many who took part; most went to prison, some died. No one walked away untouched.

Something funny happened too. The abbot had given strict orders to be transmitted by Father Merton, that no Protestant in attendance at Mass during the retreat was to be

as owner another Jesuit. He was thus conveying in a peculiar Morse code, his annoyance. Whether at my words or attire or both, remains to this day uncertain.

But no matter. The delicious wackiness of the scene, the splendid tatterdemalion, would have won a gargantuan belly laugh from Tom.

All thanks to our friend and monk, thanks too to his scribe, faithful and skilled.

The latter quotes the former; let the words serve as an epitaph.

"No matter what mistakes and delusions have marked my life, most of it I think has been happiness and, as far as I can tell, truth."

Prosit, dear lucky man. You live. ✚